Like Spinning Plates by botanicapoetica

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He knew Billy didn’t want to go in. He didn’t either.

Like Spinning Plates

Coming back to school that Monday was exciting and terrifying all at once. Steve had stayed at the cabin all weekend, pulling information from Hopper and watching Billy and El together. Mostly watching Billy. Some big piece of him had broken off since that night in the hospital, and Steve knew they weren't getting it back. Even at his new home, with people who cared about him filling in the gaps, he didn't talk. One or two words, sometimes, but Steve could see it was like pulling teeth for Billy.

He'd offered to drive Billy to school with him, spending the ride talking his ear off, trying to get him comfortable with the impending stimulus that awaited them. He knew Billy didn't want to go, Steve didn't want to go either. He let Billy get out before him, watching the way Billy walked into school like he was marching to a firing squad and there was nothing he could do.

When Steve walked to his locker he couldn't help but glance to Billy's, his eyebrows coming together at the sight. Tommy was leaning against the locker next to Billy's, smiling in that way that usually meant he was joking. That could've easily been true, except Billy's jaw was clenched so hard Steve could see the muscle jumping in his face. Tommy leaned in for another second before sauntering off, leaving Billy to very purposefully shut his locker and head to home room.

There was no seat open next to Billy when Steve followed him in but he sat as close as he could, trying to silently catch the other boy's attention to no avail. Maybe half an hour passed, Billy's knee bouncing furiously the entire time until he stood up and walked to the teacher's desk, flashing that familiar piece of paper and kicking the door open to leave. Steve waited a bit before asking for a bathroom pass and spent some long minutes searching the halls and the parking lot with no luck.

Steve entered the bathroom and bent over to check the stalls, relieved when he saw a familiar pair of boots in the stall at the end and no others. He walked to the stall, tapping on it gently and kicking his foot underneath to let Billy know it was him. He felt the

lock slide out under his hand and frowned when it opened. Billy was sitting, his elbows on his knees and one hand pressed to his eyes, making them impossible to see. He stepped closer, prying the hand away for only a second but long enough to see Billy's eyes were red.

"Hey. Hey, it's alright. Not much longer, Billy. You won't have to deal with these pieces of shit, just a few more months."

"Crazy."

Steve hadn't been expecting a response and he sure as hell didn't want this one. He watched Billy take his hand away, wet eyes on display now, and use the hand to point against his forehead. "Crazy." He felt his blood boil at the look in Billy's eyes, like he never wanted to come out of the stall again. Is this how Billy had felt when he'd come back? When Steve did nothing but watch him?

"Who said that?" Steve asked, listening patiently as Billy worked the words around in his mouth before telling him. He decided to bide his time, knew he had to make a point. Anything to get that look off Billy's face. Anything to make him feel just a little bit safer at school.

"Hey, Tommy, you still drive that red piece of shit?" Steve says conversationally, bending down to tie his sneakers in the locker room. He watches Tommy blink at him, sees Billy sparing him a look out of the corner of his eye.

"Why?" Tommy replies, but that's enough of an answer for Steve. He straightens up instantly and heads for the parking lot, Billy following quickly behind without a word, a sigh of resignation floating past him. Steve's opening his trunk and taking the bat out, searching out Tommy's car until his eyes land on it, and then it's a fucking beeline. He ignores the sounds of people approaching the parking lot, the sound of Tommy yelling his name. He gives the bat an experimental twirl and swings it into the driver's side mirror, blowing it right off the car. Tommy is there but he figures something about a nail-filled bat keeps him from approaching closer, and Steve tunes out the sounds of him screaming obscenities at him as he obliterates the passenger side mirror.

“I don’t want to hear anymore bullshit out of you. I don’t want to hear his name on your lips, shithead. Do you understand?” Steve says, making sure he’s enunciating as clearly as possible. He watches Tommy bristle but nod, gives him a gentle poke in the chest with the bat and turns on his heel. He has to keep himself from smiling too brightly when he takes in Billy, sitting on his trunk, the little smile in his eyes telling him he did good.